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Style Statements

on the move

Meet Kim Van Loo from West Indies Wear who launched her range of distinctively tropical collections from the 34-foot boat she and her partner sailed across the Atlantic. By Fiona Harper.

"We would sail from island to island and anchor off these amazing Caribbean resorts. I would iron the fashion samples with an old fashioned stove-top iron, get all dressed up and my husband would take me ashore with my sample bag. Once on the dock, I would slip on my glamorous sandals, brush my hair and visit resort boutique buyers," explains designer Kim Van Loo on the early days after launching West Indies Wear.

"It was a great contrast between our simple boating life and the glamorous side of fashion," she says.

Van Loo launched her first collection in 2006 from the 34-

foot yacht the pair sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. They had met while both working at Billabong in South Africa at a time when she had almost reached burn-out through a career that had taken her from Australia to London, Egypt and South Africa. Both adventurous outdoors types, while camping one weekend they discovered a mutual interest in sailing and travelling and soon hatched a plan to buy a sailboat and sail to the Caribbean.

They saved hard, learnt to navigate, built up their experience and set sail two years later, arriving in Tobago and settling into a typical 'boatie' existence of surfing, snorkelling and fishing.



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“Sailing to the Caribbean took 48 days. When we finally made it, we were exhausted! We dropped anchor and hardly moved for ten months, living on fish and rice, spending only \$100 a month,” recalls Van Loo. Jobs were scarce so, to earn a living, Van Loo made and sold beaded jewellery and imported basket-ware before eventually returning to her fashion roots, starting her own label and a new family along the way.

Van Loo’s interest in sailing to tropical islands was ignited in the late 1970s as a seven-year-old when her father took her to Fiji where they stayed onboard the yacht her aunty and uncle were cruising the South Pacific on. Fiji’s tourism was in its infancy and a young, fair-skinned Australian girl on Suva’s streets was a novelty. Van Loo was equally fascinated by exotic Fijians and the ever-smiling women with colourful flowers tucked behind their ears.

“The Fijian women were fascinated with me and would all crowd around me – I felt like a celebrity! I was intimidated by their big afro hairdos, but they had the biggest smiles I had ever seen,” says Van Loo.

“One thing that sticks in my mind was the enormous hibiscus flowers. Coming from Wollongong (Australia), I had never seen anything so gorgeous. Someone gave me one at

the airport and I desperately wanted to take this flower home with me.”

That first Fijian holiday was the catalyst for future family sailing adventures, inspiring her father to buy a 21-foot trailer yacht upon returning home. Soon, the two sisters were plucked out of school as the family sailed the Queensland coast for months at a time.

“My parents towed the boat to Gladstone, and we spent idyllic months cruising through the Whitsunday Islands then to Cairns. Dad would hitchhike back to Gladstone, pick up the car and trailer, take the boat out of the water, drive back to Wollongong and we’d go back to school,” remembers Van Loo.

“These memories are a strong part of who I am.”

Inspired by these family travels and their sometimes-bohemian lifestyle, Van Loo had developed an interest in the arts and studied fashion design after leaving school. Selected as her college’s top student, she tasted national success as a 21-year-old when her graduation collection was chosen to represent her college at the 1992 Australian Fashion Industry Awards.

“I made a brightly coloured resort-wear collection which was ideal for the Queensland lifestyle. Funnily enough, it



was not far from what I ended up designing all these years later," she laughs.

With her first collection paraded on live television, a big deal for any designer, let alone one fresh out of college, Van Loo's career was launched.

Honing her skills in Brisbane's fashion industry, before long the big city lights of London lured the young designer and she landed a job grading clothing patterns. Tantalised by the exoticism of the Middle East, she moved to Alexandria to work for an Egyptian clothing manufacturer before settling in South Africa where she worked her way up to become Head Designer at Billabong.

Inspired by the laid back lifestyle of the Caribbean, in launching West Indies Wear, Van Loo had identified that cotton clothing, which is ideally suited to the tropics, was simply not available.

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Van Loo travelled to India to source pure cotton fabrics that have become the hallmark of her label, designing the first collection on an overnight train from Jaipur to New Delhi.

"I found the most amazing soft cottons, perfect for sarongs and tunics to wear in the Caribbean heat. I was so excited! By the time the train rolled into New Delhi I had drawn up all the sketches, selected colours, designed the prints, beads, trims, labels and hang tags," says Van Loo.

"In the early days of West Indies Wear I was working on instinct. A buyer had mentioned that anything aqua or turquoise sells, which became an early influence for the colours I used. Then I did palm tree and palm leaf designs, adding starfish and other beach themes later," she says.

Soon she and her husband moved ashore to a St Maarten apartment as the business outgrew the yacht.

With West Indies Wear now a well-established brand in the USA, their family was also growing and the yacht was sold before they moved home to Australia.

In the wake of a successful launch of her 2019 collection, which features trademark starfish designs along with palm trees and marine motifs across beach coverups, sarongs, tunic-style tops and dresses, Van Loo is focused on growing her label in the Australia/Pacific region.

Having first set eyes upon exquisite West Indies Wear garments while sailing through the same Fijian islands that piqued Van Loo's interest, I can't wait to see what she comes up with for her next collection. One thing is certain: whatever she designs, it will be perfectly suited to tropical living.

More information: www.shopwestindieswear.com

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